

CHAPTER 6

CHINA'S MEDIA AND INFORMATION CONTROLS

The Commission shall investigate and report on “FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION”—The implications of restrictions on speech and access to information in the People’s Republic of China for its relations with the United States in the areas of economic and security policy.”

Key Findings

- The Chinese government has put in place extensive controls to direct the flow of information to its citizens, stifling dissent and allowing the government to shape public opinion and views of foreign countries such as the United States.
- The use of legislation and the imprisonment of journalists, especially Chinese employees of foreign media, have led the Chinese media to “self-censor” to avoid prosecution. The U.S. government, media, and businesses are unable to obtain basic economic, market, demographic, agricultural, and political information.
- The Chinese government filters the Internet, using regulation, software, and hardware to prevent citizens from obtaining access to information it deems unacceptable, as well as information from foreign media sources. Internet-related U.S. companies that wish to do business in China are forced to choose between complying with Chinese regulations that limit free speech, or not entering the Chinese market at all.

In an ongoing effort to maintain its hold on power, promote nationalism, limit access to a free press, and stifle dissent, China has been increasing its control over media and information flows, including the Internet. Through this control and manipulation, the Chinese government shapes public opinion, including public opinion regarding Taiwan and the United States. This creates misunderstanding and can induce public protests against foreign countries. The Commission remains concerned about the long-term effects of these practices on the way that Chinese citizens who are subjected to manipulated and highly controlled information view the United States and other democratic nations.

In April 2006, the State Department complained about increased Chinese censorship and abuse of China’s journalists by the Chinese government.¹ This is supported by a leading journalists’ rights group, Reporters Without Borders, that noted, “Faced with growing social unrest, the [Chinese] government has chosen to impose a news blackout. The press has been forced into self-censorship, the

Internet purged, and foreign media kept at a distance.”² The censorship crackdown is so severe that a group of retired, senior Chinese officials openly complained about media censorship and the closing of an investigative newspaper.³

To achieve its objectives, China employs an army of censors who, on a daily basis, notify Chinese editors about topics that are prohibited that day.⁴ Censors will have increasing power if a new law passes that permits a \$17,000 fine for those reporting on public emergencies or “sudden events” without government approval.⁵ Government harassment and abuse of journalists in China continues.⁶ At the beginning of 2006, there were reportedly over 30 journalists imprisoned in China.⁷ Chinese journalists with connections to foreign media are particularly vulnerable to government abuse.⁸ For example, despite being arrested in September 2004, *New York Times* researcher Zhao Yan was not tried until August 2006. While the charge of disclosing “state secrets” was dropped, Zhao was still sentenced to three years on a fraud charge.⁹ The same week, Ching Cheong, a correspondent for Singapore’s *The Straits Times*, also was sentenced to five years in prison for selling “state secrets” to Taiwan.¹⁰

The Chinese central government is particularly active in censoring foreign media. In April 2006 China renewed a law banning television stations from broadcasting foreign news footage without prior screening.¹¹ China also prohibits the import of foreign political publications and earlier this spring banned the U.S.-based magazine *Rolling Stone*. In addition, the Chinese government jams the radio transmissions from the Voice of America and the Chinese-language service of Radio Free Asia.¹³ Complaints filed through the U.S. Federal Communications Commission to the International Telecommunications Union have met with no success in stopping the interference.¹⁴

In early September 2006, Xinhua, the Chinese state news agency, promulgated new measures that require foreign news agencies to have their information approved through Xinhua before it can be released to other Chinese media. Furthermore, foreign media must use only entities approved by Xinhua as their agents in China. These measures effectively make the state news agency the gatekeeper for foreign media reports entering China.¹⁵

As Internet use has burgeoned in China, the government’s efforts to censor and control its use have increased dramatically for the same reasons China censors the traditional media: preventing foreign and domestic criticism and stifling organized protests. In 2005, 111 million Chinese went on-line, making it the second largest Internet-using country.¹⁶ However, the Chinese government censors the Internet both by filtering it for “key words” it finds unacceptable and by blocking entire Web sites.¹⁷ Both access to Web sites potentially critical of the government that are run by other governments, human rights organizations, or political groups, and Internet content are restricted in China by the world’s most sophisticated Internet censorship force. Blocked sites have included those operated by the British Broadcasting Corporation, Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, and *The New York Times*.¹⁸

According to the Open Net Initiative, “China operates the most extensive, technologically sophisticated, and broad-reaching system

of Internet filtering in the world. The implications of this distorted on-line information environment for China's users are profound, and disturbing."¹⁹ Techniques used to disrupt Internet access include using routers and software to block or disrupt connections to sensitive sites and discussion boards,²⁰ imposition of burdensome licensing requirements, and harsh enforcement of prohibitions that prompts self-censorship.²¹ Internet service providers, as a condition of operating in China, must retain personal data on their subscribers such as their phone numbers, sites they viewed, and the amount of Internet time they used, and provide that information to the Chinese government when requested to do so.²²

The role of U.S. companies in China's Internet censorship efforts has been widely discussed since Google introduced a search engine, Google.cn, for the Chinese market. In order to operate this site in China, Google agreed to obey Beijing's censorship rules and in China eliminate search results the government identified as unacceptable.²³ Other U.S. companies also have cooperated with Beijing. In 2004 Yahoo provided Beijing with information about one of its email users who subsequently was jailed for leaking government information to a pro-democracy group in New York.²⁴ In December 2005, Microsoft, at Beijing's request, removed the postings of a free-speech advocate, Zhao Jing, from its blogging service.²⁵ American technology firms also have sold hardware to China for use in monitoring or filtering the online activities of its citizens.²⁶

U.S. Responses and Initiatives

In response to Chinese attempts to limit access and filter the content of the Web sites of U.S.-sponsored programs such as Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors has devised a "push-pull" system. Mr. Kenneth Berman of the Board described the "push" as e-mails designed to pass through Chinese e-mail censoring software, sent to "those users in China who would find the news interesting, useful, or a necessary complement to the official, approved news stories."²⁷ The "pull" consists of a link inside the e-mail to a "proxy site," one that is not yet filtered by Chinese Internet controls, yet provides access to the Voice of America and Radio Free Asia Web sites and, if so desired, then on to any other site in the world.²⁸

During the 109th Congress, several bills were introduced in the House that propose establishment of an office within the U.S. government to monitor global Internet freedom, prepare an annual report on countries that restrict their citizens' access to the Internet, and prohibit U.S. businesses from allowing Internet filtering or exporting filtering-related technologies. Some of the bills also establish civil and criminal penalties for assisting Internet-filtering countries.²⁹

In February 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice established the Global Information Freedom Task Force, an interagency group that considers foreign policy aspects of Internet freedom and the impact of censorship on U.S. companies, and that makes recommendations to the Secretary on policy and diplomatic initiatives that maximize access to the Internet while minimizing foreign government efforts to block information.³⁰ The Task Force's second

meeting focused on the challenges to Internet freedom in China among other countries.³¹

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Commission recommends that Congress urge the Administration to demand that China stop jamming Voice of America and Radio Free Asia broadcasts, and to instruct its officials to raise the issue of media and Internet freedom in meetings with their Chinese counterparts and to remind those counterparts that jailing journalists for publishing information China finds distasteful only draws negative attention from the international community.
- The Commission recommends that Congress prohibit disclosure by U.S. companies to the Chinese government, in the absence of formal legal action by the Chinese government, of information about Chinese users or authors of online content. Congress should require that where a U.S. company is compelled to act, it shall inform the U.S. government. A compilation of this information should be made publicly available semi-annually.
- The Commission recommends that Congress expand support for both the Broadcasting Board of Governors' program for circumventing Chinese Internet censorship and the U.S. State Department's Global Internet Freedom Task Force.

ENDNOTES

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